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ABSTRACT

Competent practice in the field of evaluation calls upon many skills, which all can be taught. This paper suggests one perspective on how these evaluation skills could be acquired. A seven-item question-and-answer format is used to respond to a panel discussing structuring a program to prepare professional evaluators. The following questions are addressed: (1) whether evaluation is now a professional field or whether it is in the process of becoming a professional field within the near future; (2) whether or not unique features (skills, expertise, theories, techniques, etc.) define the professional practice of evaluation and separate it from other social science areas; (3) what elements of the structure (scope and sequence) of an educational program about evaluation are desirable; (4) for whom or at what level (undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate) should the educational program on evaluation be targetted and how much time would be required to complete it; (5) what types of learning experiences (internships, practica, laboratories, etc.) would be included in the educational program on evaluation; (6) where would the ideal program be located (in a single discipline, across disciplines, etc.); and (7) are there other issues and concerns that should be brought to the attention of the panel. (RLC)

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STRUCTURING A PROGRAM TO PREPARE PROFESSIONAL EVALUATORS

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Panel Presentation: "Structuring a Program to Prepare Professional Evaluators Nick Eastmond: AEA Seattle, 11/5/92

The field of evaluation continues to fascinate those of us lucky enough to be involved with it Competent practice calls upon many skills, all skills that can be taught. This paper suggests one perspective on how these skills could be acquired. A question-and-answer format feels like an efficient way to come to respond to the panel's questions.

1. Is evaluation a professional field now or is it in the process of becoming a professional field within the near future (10-15 years)?

The field of evaluation, and here I think mainly of program evaluation, but would also include product, project and personnel evaluation as well, is in the process of emerging as its own discipline. While many of us tend to think that it has arrived, a few conversations with others outside of our ranks will quickly suggest that we are not yet recognized in the same sense as are psychologists, sociologists, or medical technologists, to say nothing of more traditional lines of work such as medical doctors or librarians. Such recognition is partly a function of professional standards and practice, and partly a function of time and tradition.

In the field of educational evaluation, the Joint Committee Standards on educational programs, projects and materials (1981) and on personnel (1989) should be seen as major milestones on the road to professionalism. For the field as a whole, the rise of the American Evaluation Association is also an important step. However, the number of people who would identify themselves first as evaluators or evaluation specialists, rather than with some other primary disciplinary descriptor, remains small but growing. The fifteen year timeline may be about right for the kind of acceptance accorded a number of the more established fields.

2. Are there unique features (skills, expertise, theories, techniques, etc.) that define the professional practice of evaluation and that separate it from other social science areas?

Evaluators constantly borrow tools, techniques and theories from other disciplines. There seems to be no end to the variety and sophistication of these items borrowed. However, evaluation provides a unique framework for their implementation. That framework stems from the definition of evaluation Here I quote from Worthen and Sanders (1987):

> Evaluation is the determination of a thing's value. In education, it is the formal determination of the quality, effectiveness, or value of a program, product, project, process, objective, or curriculum. Evaluation uses inquiry and judgment methods, including: (1) determining standards for judging quality and deciding whether those standards should be relative or absolute; collecting relevant information; and (3) applying the standards to determine quality. Evaluation can apply to either current or proposed enterprises. (pp. 22-23).

It is the combination of "inquiry and judgment" that makes evaluation unique. Evaluation requires a sense of the political, of how people come to agreements and exert their own wills. It requires an ability to make informed value judgments and not, as some researchers have proposed, to shun value-laden conclusions. It requires a sense of context, to understand the presuppositions of the organization or groups involved. These elements are key, and are configured in a way with evaluation that is not typical of research or policy work or other human activity.

Some skills are common to other areas of human activity, but are vital nonetheless. A knowledge of measurement, research design and statistics could be considered essential. A certain ingenuity in discerning "alternative indicators", where the most logical indicators are probably impractical, unethical or unattainable, is of considerable worth. An ability to investigate qualitative issues from one or more theoretical perspectives is essential. Communication skills -- oral, written and graphic -- are key. And there are no substitutes for good social and interpersonal skills.

Certain attitudes are essential but certainly not confined to the field of evaluation: an innate curiousity to understand how things work or do not; an ability to show respect for the efforts of others and to give them the benefit of the doubt regarding motives; and an innate sense of ethical behavior.

3. What are the elements of the structure (scope and sequence) of the program you feel is desirable?

4. For whom or at what level (undergraduate, graduate, post-graduate) should the program be targetted? How much time would be required to complete it?

5. What types of learning experiences (internships, practica, laboratories, etc.) would be included in your program?

Having helped design a graduate level curriculum to train evaluators, I find my thinking oriented to the graduate school level. I feel that an undergraduate degree in the humanities or social sciences, broadly defined, should be a pre-requisite for the training. While evaluation skills could be provided on a post-graduate basis, that seems to be a bit late to start.

The actual training should be a mix of academic study and practical internship. I believe that the internship or work experience can begin as early as the first term of study. The students who express excitement about evaluation, in my experience, are always the ones who have become involved in some sort of real-life project.

In another article (Eastmond, Saunders & Merrell, 1989), I have described procedures for using an existing class to conduct an actual evaluation study. That idea is still a good one, taking an evaluation contract and filling it as a class. The teacher, of course, maintains quality control and must accept responsibility for the resulting workmanship.

Another idea with promise, as described in a future scenario for the year 2010, (Eastmond, 1991) would take the Joint Committee evaluation standards as currently revised and to present them as video case studies -- on videodisc, digital video or compact disc. These could be made interactive, with the student asked to work individually or as a member of a group to make decisions and then view the consequences of actions taken. Such simulations can also be done in classroom situations, with role playing and extensive debriefing (a low-tech solution). In any case, the use of simulated experience should be viewed as helpful, but still not a real substitute for direct experience with evaluation.

Given ideal conditions, I do not know how long this combination of internship and academic study ought to take. I see it in terms of years, rather than months; however, it is easy to overestimate the time required. Given capable learners and expertly designed instruction, time requirements could certainly be shortened from our present programs to train evaluators. Ideally, the program could begin at the level of competence of the learner and allow for completion when appropriate competencies are demonstrated. While not requiring as extensive an investment of time as a full apprenticeship program, this program needs adequate monitoring and supervision by a competent professional, be it a university faculty member or experienced practitioner. It is worth remembering that in evaluation, as in few other domains, "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing".

6. Where would the ideal program be located (In a single discipline? across disciplines? etc.).

In my opinion, the ideal program would be cross-disciplinary. It would draw expertise from a variety of disciplines, and would attract students from a variety of disciplinary "home bases".

The longer I work in various evaluation contexts, the greater my appreciation becomes for the insights to be gained from a variety of fields: cost/benefit-effectiveness from economics, ethnography from anthropology, statistics and research methodologies from a variety of the social sciences. To me it seems impossible to create these areas of expertise within a single discipline.

7. Are there other issues and concerns that should be brought to the attention of the board?

Becoming a competent evaluator is a lifelong pursuit, in my opinion. We live in an age of lifelong learning. Any practicing evaluator must continue to develop skills -- through a variety of projects, through exposure to novel ideas, through a program of personal self-study. As the profession progresses, the practitioner must reflect on the meaning of personal experience and must search out ways to build added personal capability. This kind of training is not done once-and-for-all and then left alone.

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